

The Role of Discretion from the Perspective of Social Work Professionalism and Automated Decision Making

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Abstract: This article addresses the gap in knowledge about how new digital technology affects decision making and social caseworkers' professionalism. The aim is to enhance the understanding of how digital discretion—as a result of introducing automated decision making (ADM) in social assistance—affects the roles, work processes and professional judgements of social caseworkers in the provision of social assistance. Based on social caseworkers' experiences of their work processes and interactions with digitalisation, our research question is as follows: What changes have social caseworkers observed in their use of discretion and professional judgement in decision making? The empirical data consist of qualitative semi-structured interviews with social caseworkers and their team leaders, combined with text analysis of policy documents from five municipalities in Sweden which have implemented ADM in their handling of social assistance. The results show that the use of ADM can give more time for meetings with clients and that the use of discretion is experienced as more secure in relation to social caseworkers' experience of making the right decision. However, the findings also show that digitalisation must be seen from a holistic perspective that involves all components of the technological infrastructure and the significance of the individual parts of the implemented technology to the whole. The concept of discretion needs to be studied and discussed in depth in relation to digitalisation and professionalism and including clients.

Keywords: discretion, digital discretion, digitalisation, social assistance, automated decision making (ADM)

Introduction

This study¹ examines, on the one hand, the interactions between discretion and professionalism and, on the other hand, a digital, more or less automated, decision-making process in social

services (Petersen 2021; Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; 2022). In this process, new knowledge can be consolidated that may contribute to ensuring that decisions are made fairly on the basis of equal treatment of clients.

In the Swedish context, social services are provided by municipalities. The country's 290 municipalities are self-governed and have major responsibilities for routine local activities, such as childcare, primary and secondary education, labour market issues and social services. Municipalities are governed by

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political boards and financed by public funds, mostly local. In these municipalities, bureaucrats work on various activities, including decision making.

Social assistance provides monetary help to individuals who cannot support themselves financially and is regulated under the Social Services Act (2001:453). Municipalities are responsible for social services under the statutory principle of municipal self-determination. Since the late 1980s, a critical debate has been in progress regarding the differences in social assistance decisions between municipalities and the lack of lawproof decisions regarding social services (Pettersson 2014). To receive social assistance, clients must apply for social services; this process determines the amount of social assistance provided to the client based on their income and expenses. In the past few years, e-applications have increasingly replaced paper applications and have been handled through digital case management systems. To be granted social assistance, clients must be available to the labour market, with the goal of becoming self-sufficient.

Digital technology per se is not new in the field of social services and is now used, for example, in case management (Devlieghere et al. 2018), documentation and evaluation (Carrilio 2008) and interaction in care (Gavin and Steckley 2020). Interestingly, it is much rarer in more direct decision making. Since 2017, however, automated decision making (ADM) has been developed through robotic process automation (RPA) as part of the case management process and decision making related to social assistance (cf. Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; 2022). RPA is a kind of *software robot* that uses pre-programmed rules when going through digital information (Wirtz et al. 2019), such as the content of social assistance applications submitted digitally by clients, enabling RPA to suggest an outcome or decision. This raises questions about the nature and role of discretion, when bureaucrats exercise a degree of freedom in individual

cases to adjust their decision making based on laws and regulations (Lipsky 2010) as well as about professionalism. Some studies have investigated experiences in using ADM and RPA in the decision-making process for social assistance, but the focus has been on the details of the interactions between humans, technology and discretion (cf. Gustafsson and Whilborg 2019; Petersen et al. 2020; Ranerup and Henriksen 2022; Caserta and Thumand 2021). Studies have examined how fully or partially automated services change civil servants' professional roles and processes and influence their professional judgements in general. Studies have also shown that civil servants can circumvent the mandated use of ADM, suggesting that fully automated ADM services may be less suitable for more traditional public services, such as school and social services involving close interactions with clients (Busch and Henriksen 2018; Petersen et al. 2020). Developed welfare states, such as Sweden, tend to trust RPA and its pre-programmed rules to treat clients more equally, make decision making more efficient and ensure objectivity (Enarsson, Enqvist, and Naarttijärvi 2021). Thus, computerised routines and analyses are increasingly used to influence or replace human judgement. Such digital discretion will, of course, affect the roles and work practices of civil servants. The increased use of digital technology in this area demands more knowledge about discretion from the perspective of the social case workers.

This study addresses the gap in knowledge about how new digital technology affects decision making and social caseworkers' professionalism from a multiple case perspective. The aim is to enhance the understanding of how digital discretion—as a result of introducing ADM in social assistance—affects the roles, work processes and professional judgements of social caseworkers in the provision of social assistance. Based on social caseworkers' experiences of their work processes and interactions

with digitalisation, our research question is as follows:

- What changes have social caseworkers observed in their use of discretion and professional judgement in decision making?

Theory and previous research

In *Street-level Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Michael Lipsky (1980) describes how street-level bureaucrats, who have direct contact with members of the general public, enjoy some degree of freedom—discretion—in how they enforce a society's rules, laws and policies that they are expected to uphold. However, even with this freedom, they must still operate within the rule of law, as regulations and laws ensure that citizens are treated fairly and ethically. Evans and Hupe (2020) state that the most quoted definitions of discretion are derived from the realm of law and justice. *Law* is defined as the formalised norms of society, and *justice* implies that all citizens must be subject to and equal before the law (Ross 2019). The relationship between discretion and rules is described in Dworkin's often-quoted phrase, 'an area left over by a surrounding belt of restrictions' (Dworkin 1977, pp. 31–32).

Discretion can be described as a decisive factor in the process of decision making that, of course, includes the possibility of acting within the law or not (Carrington 2005). Although Dworkin states that acting outside the law eliminates the discussion about discretion, any understanding of discretion as a legal concept presupposes discretion to act within the law. Dworkin developed his concept of discretion as a critique of the more positivist position that Hart offered. In this context, it is important to recall that Hart expanded the reading of positive law theory, including the philosophical and sociological aspects of assessments, as a critique against Kelsen, who defended a more limited view. Dworkin makes a difference between strong and weak discretion. He means,

for example, that judges, or any other law-applying officials, exercise weak discretion, as they use not only rules but also principles in their decision-making processes. They will then make professional judgements based on their deep knowledge of the legal order. This form of (weak) discretion makes them capable of correctly interpreting the web of principles constituting the legal order and will always, in this way, be able to identify the *one right answer* (Dworkin 1977).

Lipsky emphasizes, in this way, the extensive perspective of weak discretion, as he points out that grassroots bureaucrats must confront specific cases and make the most appropriate decisions for clients in their unique situations. In these cases, they must depart from service ideals to cope with expectations in their work situations and with public ideals. Lipsky also states that discretion cannot be removed from the everyday practices of grassroots bureaucrats because of the complexity and uncertainty of human service work. Lipsky's main contribution is illustrating how street-level bureaucrats become the human face of public policy implementation as a consequence of their actions in practice, representing a bottom-up approach to policy implementation. Of course, concerns about the abuse of power have inspired discussions about discretion, and several attempts have been made to unfold and scrutinise the nature of discretion (Galligan 1990/2010; Endicott 2003/2010; Carrington 2005; Kelly 1994).

Research shows that various forms of digitalisation have major impacts on public servants who provide services to citizens. Two distinct theoretical streams have emerged; the curtailment thesis states that new digital technology will reduce the freedom to exercise discretion, whereas the enablement thesis holds that technology will instead empower public servants and increase the possibility of discretion (Buffat 2016; Busch and Henriksen 2018; Jorna and Wagenaar 2007; Snellen 2002). Various researchers argue that examining digital technology im-

proves our ability to explore and understand human and non-human actors' roles, accountability and discretionary functions in ADM when RPA is used (Ananny and Crawford 2018; Kitchin 2017; Ranerup and Henriksen 2019). Bullock (2019) and Busch and Henriksen (2018) offer an important perspective in addressing the impact of the context and potential level of codification in a concrete situation. The level of codification of a concrete process is essential for the programming of algorithms, and it differs from sector to sector. For example, taxation will probably be easier to codify than a child's placement in a foster family (Bullock 2019; Bush and Henriksen 2018).

As civil servants, social caseworkers have been categorised as grassroots bureaucrats, and the discussion of their discretion spans several definitions (Rice 2013). As a relic of Lipsky, however, discretion has often been placed at the individual level. This has led to a seldom-discussed assumption that social caseworkers' use of discretion is a subjective judgement (see, for example, Egelund and Thomsen 2002; Wallander and Molander 2014). In her thesis, Petersen notes that an analysis from a practice-oriented perspective is missing, and this has led to 'the widely held belief that digitalization can (and should) work as an efficient means to reduce the discretionary freedom of social workers' (Petersen 2021, p. 23). From this line of thinking emerges the concept of *digital discretion*, in which discretion is understood to shift from street-level bureaucrats' practice to the use of technologies that either replace or influence discretionary practice (Busch and Henriksen 2018).

In social work research from the early 2000s, researchers studying discretion and professionalism already encountered difficulties in identifying concrete professional opinions in the decision-making process and professional social work competence in attempting to understand the great complexity of social problems. A critical debate emerged about the rule of law

and extended, but more professional, discretion (Galligan 1990/2010; Endicott 2003/2010; Evans 2010; Jorna and Wagenaar 2007; Webb 2001). The concept of evidence-based practice was established, and it argued that professional decisions should be based on theories and evidence-based research, eschewing practitioners' knowledge and users' voices and experiences.

In Sweden, the decision of a caseworker carries the legal power of a court decision and may be appealed. In practice, social services and caseworkers require a high level of professional flexibility and discretion to meet the various and constantly changing needs of clients. If discretion is seen as an open area surrounded by a belt of restrictions, it is reasonable to believe that more restrictions and rules guiding the work make this area smaller or at least make it appear smaller to the outside world and to professionals (Dworkin 1977). From an organisational perspective, social caseworkers are often categorised as semi-professionals because of their mission to apply rules in practice. With this comes reduced discretion (Lipsky 2010; Svensson et al. 2021). Therefore, the development of professionalism and discretion is, in this sense, *segregated*; caseworkers administering social assistance are assumed to be of the lowest degree, as their discretion is already limited by strict policies (Dellgran and Höjer 2003). In relation to the concept of Dworkin, they exercise a kind of *weak-weak* discretion.

Social caseworkers have been criticised for not following the law when exercising discretion in their decision making (Kjellbom 2009; Svensson et al. 2021; Petersen 2021). Studies that adopt a wider non-legal view of discretion and examine it as an element of practice are often less interested in the relationship between discretion and formalised rules, such as legislation (Egelund and Thomsen 2002; Wallander and Molander 2014). In the Swedish context, this is a crucial question, as social services are a politically controlled organisation and activity of local governments. The Social Services Act

indicates that the material part of a decision should be based on professional (social work) knowledge (Government Bill 1979/80:1). Therefore, there is a risk that professionalism and politics will collide because of conflicting driving forces and values. The interaction or meeting of discretion, professionalism and the law with a digital, more or less automated, decision-making process will be studied and analysed on the basis of these theories.

Methodology

This paper describes a qualitative study of social services in five municipalities (Trelleborg, Nacka, Landskrona, Malmö and Mölndal) in Sweden. The municipalities were strategically chosen based on their use of RPA as an element of decision making in social assistance case management. Three of the municipalities (Trelleborg, Nacka, Landskrona) were among the first in Sweden to use RPA in this way (2017–2018) and had four to five years of experience, whereas the rest (Malmö and Mölndal) had less than one year of experience. The size of the municipalities ranged from 33,000 to 100,000 inhabitants.

The empirical data were collected in 2018–2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in each municipality with key informants, such as social caseworkers and team leaders. In 2018–2019, we were able to hold a few interviews face to face; those conducted in 2020–2021 were mostly conducted online (via Zoom) because of COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Altogether, 26 interviews were conducted and analysed. Text documents, such as policies, implementation plans, project descriptions and the like, were also collected and analysed. In total, 29 text documents were included.

The semi-structured qualitative interviews focused on the antecedents and rationale behind the implementation of RPA, its results in the form of implemented technology and routines,

and the participants' experience of working with social assistance before and after its implementation. The interviews aimed to acquire knowledge about the respondents' experience of discretion in the context of digital technology. The transcribed interviews and text documents were analysed in four steps. Step 1 involved a deep, close reading to become familiar with the content. The main goal was to find elements relevant to the research focus. Step 2 involved applying the theoretical concepts presented in the theory section (discretion, professionalism, digital discretion and RPA) using a deductive approach. In step 3, the segments of texts were examined inductively to find patterns in and between the themes. Significant quotations were selected as examples for presenting the findings. The last step (4) involved compiling the final results, analysing and writing the paper.

Table 1. Empirical material.

Municipality	Data source	Number of instances; dates of interviews or documents
Trelleborg, Nacka, Mölndal, Landskrona and Malmö	Interviews with team leaders and caseworkers, documents	26; 2018–2021; 2018–2021

Findings

This section presents the findings under each theme. These findings and the analysis of the emergent themes are presented together, one after another. The last section of the paper provides the concluding discussion.

Theme 1: Organisation

Social caseworkers handling social assistance are regulated by the Social Services Act, and the decision they will make has the same legal status as a court decision. To receive social assistance, clients must apply for social services; this process determines the amount of social assistance provided to the client according to their income and expenses. The social caseworker

will handle the application and process it in different parts using the digital case management system. The client has to give their consent for the handling process, and is the informed how automation will be used to secure that Article 22 of the GDPR² is not violated. During this stage, the social caseworker will also check the information the client has provided in the application. Sometimes, this means using data systems other than the case management system. The social caseworker often has delegation to make this decision by themselves. There is not only a general law to follow but also national and local regulations pointing out different costs that are allowed. The social caseworker has to handle these regulations and the judgement if the client themselves has adequately made attempts to be self-supporting during the month. The decision is not based on a checklist, as it is pointed out in the law that every client should have an individual assessment and decision.

The municipalities differed in how their case management was handled. Some organised their social assistance work in a specific way that differed from the traditional organisational model of social services by moving it to the municipality's labour market unit. Sometimes, they even moved it to a different political board. For such municipalities, a significant shift and re-organisation had to be made before (as well as independently of) the introduction of RPA. The new method of organisation impacts caseworkers' tasks and makes them more specialised.

Social caseworkers working with decisions about social assistance also have their way of working and need to be super-specialised in their field and understand the whole robot process and everything when it comes to the digital [aspect]. (Social caseworker M1)

2. Article 22 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) stipulated the right for a subject not to be subject to an individual decision making made by automation solely.

When the caseworkers were more specialised, they also described how those working with financial issues had fewer face-to-face meetings. The caseworkers' main task, then, is to work with the applications and how the clients have filled them out. One major change is that the caseworkers can now handle approximately 30%–40% more clients or tasks.

By contrast, the municipalities that still had the traditional organisation described hectic everyday situations involving both economic investigations related to decisions about economic support and what the participants termed *qualified social work*. In different ways, the informants described the dependence of qualified social work on face-to-face meetings and the interactions between professionals and their clients.

[Laughs] No, as I said, we are in a change; yes, we have been part of many parallel changes. While we have an organisation that is changing, we got Lifecare [a new system for case management] and then this e-application, and then we got something called, er, a strengthened way of working ... because clients can apply digitally, it will free up time, and then we have time to meet all our clients every month. Mm, yes, although we are not there yet. (Social caseworker M3)

Both ways of organising imply clear political and organisational philosophies behind the structure. The municipalities that have chosen to separate the social assistance process explain the move as a way of pointing out that not being able to support oneself financially is not a social problem per se but simply a concrete financial problem. Of course, they also have special work processes for clients who are assumed to have both financial and social problems. However, their overall idea is that, if people have a problem with supporting themselves financially,

they should not be treated as though they have a social problem.

Theme 2: Profession

The new work process was the first thing that the caseworkers mentioned when describing how their work routines have changed because of digitalisation, in general, and ADM, in particular. In this process, financial questions about providing economic support are separated from the discussion of enabling the client to become economically self-supporting. One of the team leaders pointed out that the formalised procedure already sorted out parts of the process, such as the calculation of financial assistance.

I still think that financial assistance is so regulated anyway, based on templates and calculations and so on, that those pieces can be handed over to someone else. And then the assessment question, 'Have you contributed to your self-sufficiency?' That is, it—this assessment and decision itself—is made by the function of individual expertise, the social worker then. (Team leader M1)

In the quote above, the team leader also implies that there is still room for qualified social work. In discussing qualified social work, one of the informants explained it as follows:

You should actually focus on meeting individuals, and you should focus on supporting them and coaching them. (Team leader M2)

In other words, when the informants defined qualified social work, they argued that it became evident when financial issues were excluded. They described it as a combination of activation work and change work involving a mix of motivating, compelling and assisting marginalised citizens to join the labour market. This, they argue, is a combination of skills that can be referred to as professional social work.

With digitalisation, however, new quantitative policy goals are formulated and implemented, such as meeting all their clients face to face once a week, a goal they described as unrealistic.

I: Approximately how many clients or cases do you have?

R: I have 45, approximately; it is usually between 40 and 45. Some have 60, and there, the management is very clear, but so, that, er, well, 15 minutes is enough, and there I become allergic to what social work I have time to do in 15 minutes.

I: Yes, it feels like a challenge, I think, at least [*laughs*].

R: I feel that our closest managers are worth their weight in gold because they back us up. They still said that we do not need to meet all our clients; we judge whom we want to meet, who needs our time [and] who does not need our time. (Social caseworker M2)

Thus, the participants described how they selected those clients with the greatest need and then worked closely with them for a limited time. The selection process they described was an assessment of both their clients' needs and their abilities to be self-supported.

Theme 3: New areas for the profession

Introducing ADM in general (and RPA in particular) as part of work processes has affected caseworkers' everyday work and the skills they need in their professional capacity. New areas of professionalism have evolved, and some old ones have disappeared.

The need for a solid professional knowledge base becomes evident when financial questions are separated from more qualified social work, which is described as work directed towards activation and change—the complex task of mo-

tivating, compelling and assisting marginalised citizens to enter the labour market. In some of the municipalities, the workload was a challenge because caseworkers had to provide both case management of social assistance and economic support. They strongly pointed out that activation and change work constituted the core of social work, in addition to identifying social problems early, such as prostitution and domestic violence. Furthermore, a more open attitude emerges when activation and change work are seen as not solely the professional responsibilities of social caseworkers because these are also supported and carried out by other professionals, such as psychologists, teachers and even personal trainers. The respondents indicated that professionalism is a question of teamwork and a process of matching.

We have structured it so that some [people] work with the exercise of authority, and the robot does its thing, which means that there is time left for the social caseworkers ... to work with planning, self-sufficiency, motivational talks, social work. So our idea when we introduced robots was that you could work with social work in a completely different way. Many people initially thought it was about reducing the number of social caseworkers, but that was not what it was about. Instead, we would have time for other [things]. (Team leader M4)

Beyond the formulation of what qualified social work involves, some new areas of professionalism have emerged, according to the informants' descriptions. The two most visible are the need for qualified knowledge of the structure of the social security insurance system and the need for financial skills, such as knowing how to cooperate with other actors in society, designing sustainable financial situations and finding solutions to financial problems.

Yes, I mean that it is often the case that, as a social caseworker in financial assistance, you become the spider in the web, that is, because it is such a central part, [that is], economics is the basis of everything. [...] And the whole social security insurance system, yes, that is all. (Team leader M2)

The interviews identified an underdeveloped area for social caseworkers and social work—the need for in-depth technological knowledge of how RPA works, as well as expertise in the cooperation between concrete cases of social assistance and the internal social services operating system.

There has been a clash with the concepts and to understand what it is, both for the tech companies to understand what is there ... And for our managers, what is possible, and what does this mean when they talk about this? ... [...]. That there are two worlds that collide. I have felt a bit like Google Translate between them. (Project leader and former social caseworker M5)

Theme 4: The use of discretion

When discussing discretion and lawfulness in the interviews, the participants commonly opined that RPA adheres more strictly to the law than a human does, but none of them saw RPA as a threat or competitor; rather, they described it as a supporting tool, albeit not perfect.

I keep in mind that you cannot just let the robot run its own race. You can see the robot as a colleague without delegation; even there, I would check what that person wrote because I am the one who makes the decision, so that is how you should try to see it. (Team leader M3)

Another benefit mentioned was that, because it is a *robot*, RPA is independent of the organisational structure. Thus, it remains unaffected

by organisational changes or by sometimes significantly uneven workloads. Another advantage was that many tedious elements in the case management process of applications for social assistance were rationalised and executed by RPA so that social caseworkers could spend their time on more complex tasks and situations. The technical solution that offers digital access to clients to enable them to follow their own case management processes was also described as a time saver. It reduced the time that the caseworkers spent delivering information, mostly by phone. The informants described the solution as improving efficiency.

In describing RPA, the participants mentioned areas that could be better developed and adjusted to social work. However, some of the municipalities with more RPA experience thought that they had come so far that they now wanted to increase the number of potential users of e-applications among their clients. The use of e-applications on clients' side is a basic condition for the use of RPA in the case management application process, and it enhances efficiency.

We have come to a plateau, and we need to take a new step towards increasing the use of e-applications. We need to understand how we can support and convince people to use them. (Team leader M1)

A common experience was the feeling of having more extensive discretion in their work situations requiring professional judgements because they have had more contacts and meetings with clients. The social caseworkers described it as knowing their clients better.

I think that you... the computer, the program, the robot [*laughs*] will handle everything until the decision and that you have such close contact with the individuals that you will know. 'Yes, but all these people who are on the OK list based on expenses

and income, I have met them, and they follow their plan'. (Social caseworker M2)

None of the social caseworkers described a situation involving a dilemma working with the decision support in the form of RPA. Instead, they took the underlying programmed rules for granted and described a sense of control with their own close interactions with the system and with clients. Actually, no one could give an example when RPA suggested a rejection, and they, as social caseworkers, did not agree.

So, it has nothing to do with the robot, but it has to do with the municipality's guidelines. The robot is only programmed by our work routines, and the social caseworkers have personal knowledge, so, if a customer lives out in a cabin in the woods with electric heating, the social caseworker goes in and approves it even if it is above what the routines say. (Team leader M2)

The participants argued that better knowledge of clients provided an improved, more secure and more professional foundation for discretion in decision making.

Concluding

Discussion

This study examined, on the one hand, the interactions between discretion and professionalism and, on the other hand, a digital, more or less automated, decision-making process in social services. Based on social caseworkers' experiences of their work processes and interactions with digitalisation, our research question was as follows: What changes have social caseworkers observed in their use of discretion and professional judgement in decision making?

The results of the interviews and text documents show that digitalisation, in general, has had a major impact on social caseworkers' work processes. The municipalities with longer RPA experience described the relationship between digitalisation and social work and the

outcomes of RPA from a more informed perspective and could pinpoint and discuss the pros and cons. Those municipalities with less experience seemed to have more problems prioritising strategic action plans in their development processes and described difficulties in determining the next step and how their results and experiences could be evaluated.

Nevertheless, the municipalities were united in describing great gains in eliminating repetitive administrative elements in their work processes. To date, they have also experienced that digitalisation frees up time that can then be used for other tasks. Some municipalities described what they considered unrealistic expectations of how quickly the efficiency benefits of RPA could be exploited through, for example, the demand to meet every client. In discussing the particular effects of RPA, the caseworkers were clear that the process involved a start-up period when some form of bridge builder was needed between the technological perspective and social work and social services competencies to explain subsequent needs and conditions.

It also became obvious that it is not possible to separate RPA from the process of digitalisation in general or from the latter's impact on social service work processes. It turns out that the new case management process established in the municipalities is a delicate network of diverse systems that together form the conditions for a changed way of working and making professional judgements. An excellent example is the technical system in which clients have access to their own information about the investigation and decision process. With secure identification, clients can access information about their cases instead of depending on contacting their social caseworkers. This result is important, as it challenges the simplistic notion that highlighting individual elements, for example, in the form of RPA, will give all the answers regarding the effects on, for example, discretion. Instead, it points to the need for both a holistic view of all the components of the technological infrastructure and the need to be even more concrete

about the significance of the individual parts of the implemented technology to the whole. Therefore, a more *holistic* perspective about the concept of digital discretion and the technologies involved is relevant (Busch and Henriksen 2018).

When answering our main research question—What changes have caseworkers observed in their use of discretion and professional judgement in decision making?—our results show that ironically, the standardisation of social work has enabled digitalisation (with the help of RPA in some parts), which seems to lead to both a *realisation* and a *redefinition* of what qualified social work is as part of social assistance, professional judgement and discretion. It becomes clear that discretion is not an individual matter concerning an individual social caseworker. Instead, it is a question of professionalism from a practice-orientated perspective, involving both old and new knowledge, as shown in the value of meeting clients more often and being able to handle the digital technology behind RPA. In this way, discretion not only becomes more extensive, or weak in the sense of Dworkin, but also includes new parameters, such as clients' voices, which go outside Lipsky's definition.

However, what is essential is that the discussion and confusion about what qualified social work is call for a revival of the discussion of the strength of professionalism in social work.

The results of this study complement those of other studies, suggesting that discretion is not limited by ADM or RPA (Enarsson et al. 2021). In light of Dworkin and the concept of weak discretion, as well as of Lipsky's definition, this is positive. It means that social caseworkers are exercising professionalism in their decision making. This study also shows that the use of digitalisation and technology, such as RPA, reduces repetitive administrative tasks and creates room for greater contact with clients (Ranerup and Henriksen 2019). This, in turn, results in clients' better knowledge, which makes social caseworkers more confident in their decisions. If the time saved is spent on greater in-

teraction with clients, it seems that the use of discretion is becoming rather more extensive, or weaker if using the categorisation of Dworkin, and that social caseworkers are becoming more confident and secure in using it. In this vein, we could also argue that the decisions being made would be more accurate, ensuring stronger lawfulness from a material perspective (Enarsson et al. 2021; Petersen 2021). However, this is the case only if we could also argue that there is strong professionalism, with a clear knowledge core in social work. The results of this study point out the meeting, motivational and change work as essential parts of that foundation. This supports the conclusion that the concept of discretion needs further discussion, as the informants' descriptions imply that RPA uses no discretion at all. Instead, it uses rules that become manifested norms reproduced in the system. At the same time, the social caseworkers described a more confident use of discretion than before as a result of these changes. One vital finding from this study is that none of the social caseworkers experienced any form of dilemma using RPA as a decision support system. This could mean, on the one hand, that RPA and social caseworkers are very closely connected and, on the other hand, that social caseworkers are working parallel with all the tasks that RPA is doing. None of these explanations is satisfactory and thus needs further investigation.

Nevertheless, sensitive and complicated questions must be raised. Although it seems that digitalisation and technology, such as RPA, are challenging the essence of social work, they also challenge our understanding of the essential knowledge required in social work and what specific professionalism it involves (Kjellbom 2009; Wallander and Molander 2014). Some of the municipalities in our study strongly argued that their activation and change work with clients were based on social workers' professionalism. Meanwhile, some of the municipalities implied that not being able to support oneself was in itself not a social problem. This raises a

delicate question about the core of professionalism in social work. As the answer is essential, it also needs to be further studied because of the relationship between combined digital technology and social caseworkers' exercise of discretion.

New technology, such as RPA, frees up time but only because the practice has become so formalised that it can be reduced to rules. Decoupling the administrative elements of the handling process creates a space where the definition and meaning of qualified social work are problematised and, to some extent, redefined.

The study's results show that in this process, when time frees up and decoupling administrative element can be done and a discussion about qualified social work evoked, two types of definitions or tracks emerge. The first is social work with an advanced link between economic transfer systems in welfare and knowledge of technical systems, in which one element constitutes solutions, such as RPA. The second is a traditional track in which individual meetings are the bases for social change work. This change makes it possible for social caseworkers to become more skilled in administrative processes; an increased opportunity to meet with clients creates deeper knowledge of them, resulting in greater adherence to making correct decisions. In relation to earlier research, these results inspire more delicate questions about discretion, professionalism and the possibility of making decisions that strictly honour lawfulness in a digital context. This discussion also puts clients on the agenda, as digitalisation and RPA involve clients in a new way.

The concept of discretion is no longer merely a matter of how social caseworkers apply formal rules. It now also involves the elements of client participation, self-determination and availability. These merit additional research and a deeper discussion of the nature of discretion in view of digitalisation, both today and in the future.

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